



Rüdiger Opelt. *Without Pain or the Search for the Gene Culprits.* Bangerter. Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture, and Thought Translation Series. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007. 209 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-158-6.

Reviewed by Ulrike Nichols (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-German (July, 2008)

The Curse of the Past

Rüdiger Opelt's novel *Without Pain* attempts to rewrite the Greek myth of the House of Tantalus, illustrating how the crime that one family member committed transforms into a curse for the following generations. Opelt, himself a professional psychologist, links his novel to his theoretical reflections on the human psyche in family relationships, *Die Kinder des Tantalus* (2002). His goal for this novel is to "construct a psychological profile of some fictional perpetrators of the Second World War" (p. 1) and to illustrate the effects of the perpetrators' actions on their children. Simultaneously, he is interested in the family psyche of the victims, and his novel sets up the experiment of an encounter between the (innocent) children of the victims and the perpetrators.

The story unfolds as a psychological thriller that begins with a mysterious murder. After a night of heavy drinking, Rafael Makord, a young psychoanalyst, finds himself in bed with an unknown corpse who resembles Vera, the woman he loves. The only difference is that the corpse is approximately twenty years older. It does not take long for the reader to learn that the dead woman is Vera's mother, Mara. Vera and Mara never met, however, because Mara was arrested as a revolutionary during the Prague Spring and deported to a Russian psychiatric hospital. There, she was used to conduct clinical experiments on pain. These experiments were initiated by the Nazis and constitute the link to Rafael Makord's father, the physician Albert Makord. Under his real name of Adolf Markosky, the father conducted "pain research" at a concentration camp during the Second World War.

One of his victims was Olga, Vera's grandmother.

The novel shifts between the year 1991, when Rafael discovers the corpse, and the war years. The second story line centers on Adolf Markosky's quest to find the perfect genetic configuration to eliminate pain. Adolf's preoccupation with the experiments stems from his inability to cope with the death of his brother, Hermann. Hermann, the personal adjutant of Reich Commissioner Reinhard Heydrich, was killed during the assassination of the commissioner. Adolf's reaction reads as follows: "Adolf was numb.... In that deepest loneliness, Adi's soul saved itself through a magical ritual. Adi melted together internally with his dead brother. Hermann's spirit jumped over into him, and his brother's legacy would continue to live through him. Adi accepted Hermann's characteristics into himself.... In his pain regarding his dead brother, Adolf took on his racist ideas" (p. 40).

This passage may already reveal the novel's main weakness. In the attempt to explain his psychoanalytical ideas, which sound rather inadequate, actual storytelling falls short. The father-son relationship between Rafael and Adolf is full of clichés, the characters remain undefined, and when they speak, they seem to lecture to the reader rather than communicate with each other. In addition, the plot is very farfetched and contrived, which culminates in the mythical farewell of the "siblings" of fate, Rafael and Vera. The two of them compare themselves to Iphigenia and Orestes when they separate, making the author's underlying source of inspiration explicit.

Another improbable factor is the novel's usage of time: Adolf's first mentioned victim is Vera's grandmother; his assistant at the concentration camp is the doctor who tortures Vera's mother in Russia. Time lines blur, as the perpetrators are not affected by age.

Anecdotal knowledge is woven into the speeches by the characters, seeking to enlighten the reader about the author's knowledge rather than to portray a conversation between two people. For example, when Rafael's lawyer tries to understand the curious phenomenon that Rafael does not know the corpse, yet believes that she looks familiar, the lawyer "enlightens" the psychoanalyst on the phenomenon of the doppelgänger: "Perhaps a doppelgänger? That's a familiar phenomenon, of course: people who look alike because they happen to be of the same type, have the same beard shape, the same hairstyle etc.... You know Jürgens von der Lippe from German television, of course. That television moderator happens to have a beard shape that resembles mine exactly. You won't believe how often people say to me: 'Oh, Jürgens von der Lippe is here again'" (p. 43). Considering that the psychoanalyst would be aware of what a doppelgänger is and would not require any instructive anecdotes from the lawyer, the lawyer's next explanatory attempt for the situation is even more bizarre. Speaking as if citing directly from a popular scientific journal, he (jokingly) suggests that the corpse might have been a cloned Vera. Consequently, the author's apparent aim to familiarize the readers with psychoanalytic

concepts ultimately undermines the intended familiarity with the story's characters. The incessant explicatory devices alienate the reader.

While the attempt to rewrite Greek mythology within the context of Austrian repression of its contribution to the Nazi crimes is an intriguing project, the shortcomings of the narrative undermine the novel's intellectual goals. Even when the connections between Austria, Nazi-Germany, Prague, and the Soviet Union are disclosed, the reader still does not get the feeling of truly knowing the characters. Not all the bad ones are dead and not all the good ones are alive. Meant as the chilling peak of the novel, the author (accidentally) discredits his notion that psychology is superior to uncontrolled genetic research, since one of the murderers emerging from the experiments to eliminate pain escapes to New York.

Without Pain is a didactic attempt to portray Opelt's belief that the effect of violence spans multiple generations and, as translator Lowell A. Bangerter points out, its focus on family relations removes it from being a mere murder mystery. The psychological approach to the themes of family, generation, violence, and history might have been the reason for the publisher to include this novel in its program of translated Austrian literature. Unfortunately, its poor literary quality prevents me from recommending this novel to teachers, students, or the general public, since its ideas can already be studied in Greek mythology or J. W. von Goethe's or Friedrich Schiller's rewritings of it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Ulrike Nichols. Review of Opelt, Rüdiger, *Without Pain or the Search for the Gene Culprits*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14773>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.